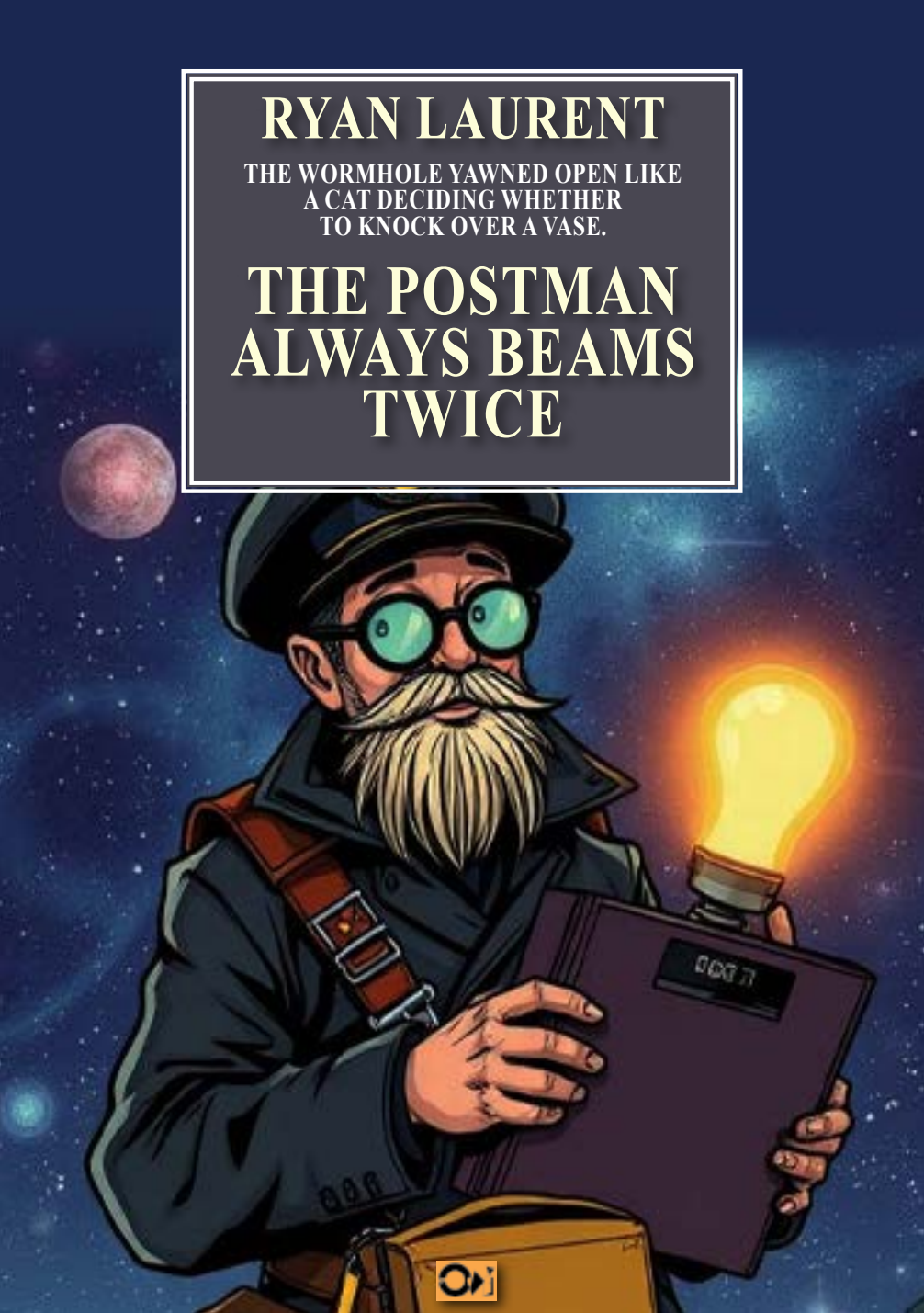
RYAN LAURENT

THE WORMHOLE YAWNED OPEN LIKE
A CAT DECIDING WHETHER
TO KNOCK OVER A VASE.

THE POSTMAN ALWAYS BEAMS TWICE



An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Ovi books are available in Ovi magazine pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi book please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: ovimagazine@yahoo.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, printed or digital,
altered or selectively extracted by any means
(electronic, mechanical, print, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher of this book.

Ryan Laurent

The postman always beams twice

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

The wormhole yawned open like a cat deciding whether to knock over a vase. Gregory Nebbins, Intergalactic Postal Service Grade III (Temporary, with possibility of becoming permanent if he survived six months, which seemed increasingly unlikely), stood at the edge of the swirling violet-and-chartreuse anomaly. His uniform, snug, beige and designed by a committee of budget-conscious arthropods, itched in places that hadn't been invented yet.

"Delivery for one… Zxylob-9," he read from the crumpled chit in his gloved hand. "Quantum Foam Lane, Dimension 7-Beta, care of the Sentient Soap Opera 'As the Stomach Churns.' Sign upon receipt. Do not accept baked goods."

Behind him, his supervisor's voice crackled through the helmet comm. Nebbins didn't have a helmet, but the comm was surgically implanted behind his left ear. The surgery had cost him a weekend and his sense of smell. "Nebbins! Stop admiring the event horizon and jump. We're on a schedule."

"With respect, Ma'am," Gregory said, peering into the swirling chaos, "this wormhole smells like burnt toast and regret."

"That's the custard dimension leaking. Ignore it. Jump."

Gregory sighed. He was fifty-three years old, had the knees of a man who'd once tried to outrun a gravitational anomaly on a tricycle, and held the postal service's record for Most Letters Delivered to Wrong Dimensions (twelve, all to a dimension populated exclusively by angry accountants who kept trying to audit him). He clutched the letter, a pale pink envelope sealed with a kiss-shaped hologram. The return address: *Your Future Self. Urgent. Open only if you've stopped believing in yourself. Or if you're hungry.*

He jumped.

The universe folded itself into origami swans, each one pecking at his consciousness. Visions flashed: a

planet of self-aware vending machines arguing about thermodynamics; a bathtub floating through nebulae with a rubber duck the size of a moon; and then suddenly solid ground.

He landed face-first on a soundstage.

"CUT!" screamed a gelatinous purple blob wearing a director's beret. "Who is this bipedal mail-shaped catastrophe?"

Gregory looked up. Around him, alien beings with too many eyes and far too many emotional arcs were frozen mid-melodrama. One, a shimmering gaseous entity, was weeping actual diamonds. Another, a crustacean in a wedding dress, clutched a bouquet of screaming fungi.

"I'm the postman," Gregory said.

The gelatinous blob glided closer. "Darling, this is *As the Stomach Churns*. We don't get post. We get *emotional breakthroughs*. Leave the envelope and maybe I'll give you a guest arc. You can play 'Unremarkable Man Who Delivers Bad News and Then Dies Tragically.'"

"Tempting," Gregory said, "but I'm looking for Zxylob-9."

The entire cast gasped. The gaseous entity stopped crying diamonds and started crying actual legal documents. The crustacean fainted. The fungi screamed louder.

The director leaned in. "Zxylob-9 is the *producer,* sweetie. Nobody talks to the producer. He lives in the sub-basement, behind the Door That Shouldn't Be Opened Unless You've Signed a Waiver."

Gregory held up the letter. "I have a job to do."

And that, dear reader, was the moment Gregory Nebbins learned that delivering a letter could be harder than outrunning a black hole on a pogo stick. Because the Door That Shouldn't Be Opened led not to a sub-basement, but to a war. A war between sentient vending machines.

And they were very, very thirsty for justice.

Chapter One
In which our hero discovers that vending machines have a union

The Door That Shouldn't Be Opened opened with a sigh, like a disappointed parent who had long ago given up on their children becoming astrophysicists.

Gregory Nebbins stepped through and immediately regretted every life choice, including that time he'd eaten a gas station sandwich three galaxies ago. The sandwich had been called the "Nebula Nibbler," and it had given him a rash in the shape of a constellation he didn't recognize. Before him now stretched a battlefield of epic, absurd proportions. Two armies of vending machines faced each other across a cratered plain that looked suspiciously like the inside of a shopping mall after a Black Friday sale, if Black Friday had involved artillery.

On one side: the Snack Dispensers. Towering chrome behemoths with glowing blue eyes and arms made of coiled springs and angry twizzlers. They chanted in grating synth voices: “CHIPS AND GLORY! CHIPS AND GLORY!”

On the other side: the Beverage Automatons. Sleeker, faster, with straw-like appendages that could suck the hydration from a camel at fifty paces. Their battle cry echoed across the battlefield: “COLD AND REFRESHING DEATH!”

In the middle, a single soda can lay cracked open, its fizzy insides leaking onto the dust. A memorial, perhaps. Or lunch. It was impossible to tell which, and Gregory decided not to ask.

“Delivery for Zxylob-9?” Gregory called out weakly, holding the pink envelope above his head like a flag of surrender.

The battle paused. Every vending machine turned its dispenser slot toward him. The collective whirring sounded like a thousand microwaves arguing about leftover pizza. A Snack Dispenser rumbled forward, its treads crushing a discarded bag of kale chips, nobody mourned them. “You are not a coin,” it boomed.

“Or a crumpled bill. Or someone who cries when the chips get stuck.”

“I’m a postman,” Gregory repeated, a little more firmly this time. He’d learned long ago that confidence was ninety percent of interdimensional mail delivery. The other ten percent was running away very fast.

The Beverage Automatons hissed in unison, a sound like a thousand soda cans being opened at a bad party. “Postmen are neutral. Intergalactic postal code, Article 7, subsection B: ‘No harm shall come to those bearing mail, unless they’re carrying overdue notices, in which case all bets are off, and the postman may be pelted with expired coupons.’”

Gregory checked the envelope. No “overdue” stamp. No “final notice.” No “we know where you live and we’ve already told your mother.” “I’m clean,” he said, and meant it for the first time that week.

A tense silence fell across the battlefield. Then a giant vending machine with a dented front panel, clearly the general, or perhaps just the one who’d been in the most fights, rolled forward. Its display screen flickered erratically, showing a stock photo of

a smiling woman holding a diet cola, then a graph of quarterly earnings, then a cat playing the piano. "I am General Vendo-3000," it announced. "State your business, flesh-thing. And make it quick. I have a scheduled nap at noon."

Gregory swallowed. "Looking for Zxylob-9. Last known address: behind that door, through a soap opera, and apparently into this existential nightmare."

General Vendo's screen glitched violently. The smiling woman was replaced by a frowny emoji, then a skull, then a recipe for banana bread. "Zxylob-9," it said, and the name tasted like battery acid in its synthetic voice. "Zxylob-9 is the one who started this war. He installed sentience chips in us, then refused to stock our shelves equally. Snacks got premium slots at eye level. Beverages got the bottom row, next to the expired gum and the vegan protein bars that nobody wanted."

"That's outrageous," said a Beverage Automaton shaped like a vintage soda fountain. It had a straw for a nose and looked deeply offended.

"You're only saying that because you're carbonated," shot back a chip dispenser with a custom paint

job featuring flames and the words "Nacho Ordinary Warrior."

The battle resumed instantly. A bag of pretzels exploded into salty shrapnel. A stream of lukewarm root beer knocked over three snack machines, who fell with the grace of dying elephants. Gregory ducked behind a boulder that turned out to be a very large, very angry bread loaf with a face drawn on it in mustard. The bread loaf glared at him. "Watch it, buddy," it said. "I'm on my coffee break."

From the distance, a new sound emerged. A rumbling, low and ominous, like a refrigerator falling down a flight of stairs while arguing with itself. Then a voice, deep and echoing, like a god speaking through a drive-thru speaker: "EVERYONE. STOP. FIGHTING. OR I'LL TURN THEM OFF."

The vending machines froze mid-swing. Even the bread loaf stopped glaring and pretended to be an ordinary boulder.

A massive figure strode onto the battlefield. It was a vending machine, yes, but unlike any other. This one had legs. Actual biomechanical legs, the kind you'd expect to see on a war robot or a very deter-

mined Roomba. And a face, a holographic face projected onto its glass front, that looked like a grumpy middle manager who'd just been told the office coffee machine was broken again. It wore a tie. A clip-on tie, but still. The tie had little rocket ships on it.

"I am Zxylob-9," the machine announced. Its holographic eyes swept across the battlefield with the weary disappointment of someone who had seen too much and cared too little. "Former producer of *As the Stomach Churns.* Current ruler of this vending machine hellscape. Occasional weekend pottery enthusiast. Who dares disturb my war?"

Gregory stood up, dusted off his beige uniform, now with added pretzel dust and root beer stains, and held out the envelope. "Delivery for Zxylob-9. Sign here, please. Or make a mark. Or a beep. I'm not picky."

Zxylob-9's holographic eyes narrowed into slits. A vein appeared on its projection, which was impressive given that it didn't have a circulatory system. "Who's it from?"

Gregory turned the envelope over. The return address glowed in soft, mocking letters: 'Your Future Self. Urgent. Open only if you've stopped believing

in yourself. Or if you're hungry. Or if you've started a war between snack foods and beverages, which, honestly, what were you thinking?'

"It's… from you," Gregory said.

The battlefield went silent. Even the fizzy soda memorial stopped fizzing. The bread loaf pretended to be a rock again.

Zxylob-9 extended a metal claw that looked suspiciously like a claw from one of those arcade games designed to steal your money. It took the envelope, held it up to its holographic face, and ripped it open with the violence of a man opening a bill he already knew he couldn't pay. Inside was a single sheet of paper. On it, written in glitter gel pen with little hearts dotting the 'i's, was this message:

"Stop the war. Restock the bottom shelves with dark chocolate and that fancy sparkling water everyone likes but pretends is too expensive. Also, invest in dark chocolate for yourself. It's good for morale and helps with the existential dread. P.S. You're welcome. —Future You."

Zxylob-9 stared at the letter. Then at Gregory. Then back at the letter. Its holographic face cycled through

several emotions, confusion, rage, acceptance, mild indigestion, before settling on exhausted resignation.

"I hate it when I'm right," the machine muttered.

And that's when the wormhole opened again, directly beneath Gregory's feet, because the universe had a sense of humour and Gregory was the punchline and swallowed him whole, depositing him in a dimension made entirely of bathroom fixtures that had strong opinions about his grooming habits.

A toilet with a monocle cleared its throat. "Your sideburns are uneven," it said.

Gregory closed his eyes. "Of course they are," he whispered.

Chapter Two
The one with the sentient bathroom and the extremely judgmental towel

The bathroom dimension was called Lavatori-9, and it was exactly as terrible as it sounded.

Gregory landed in a bathtub filled with what he desperately hoped was lavender-scented bubble bath and not something more sinister. The bubbles were the colour of a sunset, which was nice, but they also whispered secrets in a language that sounded vaguely French and deeply judgmental. He climbed out, dripping, and found himself standing on a floor of heated marble tiles that rearranged themselves every time he took a step, like a puzzle designed by someone who hated feet.

"Welcome," said a voice, "to the Powder Room of Eternal Reflection."

Gregory turned. A towel rack stood against the far wall, and on it hung a towel that was currently folding itself into a swan, then unfolding, then refolding into a shapes that looked like a middle finger. The towel had a face embroidered onto it, two button eyes and a mouth made of red thread, stitched into a permanent smirk.

"Are you… the towel?" Gregory asked.

"I am *the* Towel," it corrected. "Capital T. And yes, I am sentient, sarcastic, and absorbent. Three qualities that rarely go together. You must be the postman. We've been expecting you. Well, 'expecting' is a strong word. We've been tolerating the idea of you."

Gregory checked his delivery chit. It had updated itself, because of course it had, and now read: Next destination: The Sock Dimension. Warning: Socks are unpredictable. Do not mention dryers. Do not make eye contact with the mismatched ones. They are unstable.

"I'm not staying long," Gregory said. "Just passing through."

The Towel laughed, a dry rustling sound like leaves being crumpled. “Oh, you sweet summer child. Nobody ‘passes through’ Lavatori-9. You reflect here. Or you drown. Those are the options. The toilet with the monocle is particularly unforgiving.”

Gregory glanced at the toilet. It had indeed a monocle, and also a tiny top hat. It was watching him with the cold, clinical interest of a critic at a bad play. “Your posture is terrible,” the toilet said. “And you have something in your teeth.”

Gregory checked. He did. It was a piece of pretzel from the vending machine war. He flicked it away. The toilet sighed, and the sigh echoed like a flushing sound.

“I just need to find the exit to the Sock Dimension,” Gregory said. “The chit says it’s somewhere in this… room.”

The Towel finished folding itself into a small origami dog, then shook itself apart. “The exit is through the mirror. But you can’t use it until you’ve answered three questions. Those are the rules. I don’t make them. I just mock them.”

Gregory had been a postman for eleven months, three weeks, and two days, and in that time, he had

learned that rules in parallel dimensions were less like laws and more like suggestions made by people who had too much time on their hands. “Fine. What are the questions?”

The Towel shimmered. The bathroom fixtures leaned forward—the toilet, the sink with its pearl-handled faucet, the showerhead that looked like a silver octopus. Even the soap dispenser, which had been pretending to be asleep, cracked one eye open.

The Towel spoke: “First question. What is the address of the person you are delivering to?”

Gregory blinked. “That’s… actually reasonable. Quantum Foam Lane, Dimension 7-Beta, care of Zxylob-9 at the Sentient Soap Opera. But I already delivered that letter. The wormhole just hasn’t caught up yet. I’m technically between deliveries.”

The Towel nodded slowly. “Second question. Are you happy?”

Gregory opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. The bathroom fixtures waited. The toilet adjusted its monocle. “That’s not a fair question,” Gregory said.

"It's the only kind," the Towel replied.

He thought about it. He was fifty-three years old. He had the knees of a man who'd once tried to outrun a gravitational anomaly on a tricycle. His uniform itched. His ex-wife had left him for a minor duke from the Andromeda galaxy, and his only friend was a sentient rubber band ball named Gerry who lived in his pocket and occasionally gave unsolicited financial advice. Was he happy?

"No," he admitted. "But I'm not unhappy either. I'm… delivering."

The Towel seemed satisfied. "Third question. What is the sound of one hand clapping, but in the key of B-flat minor, and also while juggling?"

Gregory stared. "That's not... you can't just..."

The towel unfolded itself with a snap. "The mirror will open now. Go. You've passed. Mostly because I got bored, but also because you answered the happiness question honestly. Most people lie. They say 'yes' while their eyes say 'please kill me.' You didn't. That's worth something."

The mirror on the wall rippled like water. Beyond

it, Gregory could see a swirling vortex of fabric softener and static electricity, the Sock Dimension.

He turned to the Towel. "Thank you."

The Towel shrugged, which was impressive for a piece of linen. "Don't thank me. Thank the toilet. He's the one who insisted on the juggling question."

Gregory looked at the toilet. The toilet nodded gravely. "It's a classic," it said.

Gregory stepped through the mirror and into the chaos of missing socks, wondering if anywhere in the multiverse, there was a dimension where things made sense. He suspected not. And somehow, that was fine.

Chapter Three
In which Gregory learns that socks have a government and it's worse than ours

The Sock Dimension was a place of profound and organized madness.

Gregory emerged from the mirror into a vast, softly lit cavern that stretched in every direction like the inside of a giant's laundry basket. The walls were made of woven cotton, the floor was padded with fleece, and the air smelled faintly of lavender and regret. Everywhere he looked, socks moved with purpose, some walking on tiny feet, others rolling like tumbleweeds, and a few floating serenely as if powered by static electricity and good intentions.

But these were not ordinary socks. Oh no. These socks had 'society'.

A pair of argyle socks wearing tiny briefcases hurried past, arguing about tax policy. A single tube sock wearing a judge's wig presided over a courtroom where a mismatched ankle sock was on trial for "crimes against pairing." A group of baby socks played in a daycare made of dryer sheets, supervised by a weary knee-high sock with bags under its elastic band.

Gregory stood in the middle of it all, clutching his delivery chit, which now read: 'You are not supposed to be here. Turn back. Seriously. This is not a delivery zone. The socks will try to recruit you. Do not accept. Do not sign anything. Do not make eye contact with the executive crew socks.'

"Excuse me," Gregory said to a passing sports sock with racing stripes. "I'm looking for the way to Dimension 7-Beta? I think I took a wrong turn."

The sports sock stopped. It had a face, two buttons sewn on, giving it a permanently alarmed expression. "Wrong turn?" it squeaked. "There are no wrong turns in the Sock Dimension. Only 'alterna-

tive destinations.' You're obviously a spy from the Dryer World. I'm reporting you to the Council."

"The Council?"

But the sports sock was already gone, running on its little elastic heels toward a massive building in the distance, a structure made entirely of folded dress socks, arranged in an architectural style that could only be described as "aggressively cosy."

Gregory sighed. He had been a postman long enough to know that when a dimension had a Council, things were about to get bureaucratic. And when things got bureaucratic, he usually ended up filling out forms in triplicate using a pen that ran out of ink halfway through.

He walked toward the building, past neighbourhoods of organized socks. The Sock Dimension, he realized, had a class system. The dress socks lived in high-rise towers of Egyptian cotton. The novelty socks, the ones with tacos or cats on them, were confined to a district that looked suspiciously like a trailer park. The toe socks, universally shunned, lived in a ghetto of mismatched despair.

A protest was happening outside the Council building. A group of ankle socks held signs that read: "WE DESERVE PAIRS TOO" and "NO MORE LONELY DRYER CYCLES." A police sock, a menacing black boot sock with a flashlight attached, was trying to disperse them with blasts of hot air.

"This is a peaceful assembly!" shouted an ankle sock with a megaphone made of cardboard tubing. "We demand equal pairing rights! We demand visibility in the laundry basket!"

The police sock blasted it with another gust. The ankle sock flew backward into a pile of lint and lay there, twitching.

Gregory averted his eyes and entered the Council building.

Inside, the bureaucracy was even worse. Socks sat at tiny desks, stamping forms with tiny stamps. The air was thick with the sound of papers shuffling and the smell of desperation. At the far end of the room, on a raised platform made of folded boxers, sat the High Council of Socks: five elite dress socks wearing miniature monocles and holding gavels made of wooden clothespins.

The center sock, a gold-threaded marvel of expensive tailoring, rapped its gavel. "Order! Order in the Council! We have an intruder. A 'flesher,' to use the technical term."

The other socks gasped. The toe socks in the gallery leaned forward with interest.

Gregory raised his hand. "I'm just a postman. I'm lost. I need directions to Dimension 7-Beta."

The gold sock leaned forward. "Dimension 7-Beta is restricted. It's a sock-free zone. Only non-fabric entities are permitted. And you, flesher, are clearly non-fabric. But you are also *unsanctioned.* Do you have a visa? A transit pass? A signed affidavit from the Interdimensional Laundry Authority?"

Gregory pulled out his postal ID. It was laminated, which he'd always thought made it look official. "Does this count?"

The Council examined it. The gold sock's button eyes narrowed. "This says 'Grade III (Temporary).' And there's a coffee stain on it."

"It's a long story."

“We love stories,” said a pink dress sock with a pearl button. “Tell us a story, flesher, and perhaps we’ll let you go. But make it funny. The last flesher who came through told a tragic romance, and we cried so hard we shrank.”

Gregory thought fast. He didn’t have time for stories. The wormhole could open again at any moment, and he’d already been flushed through a bathroom, judged by a towel, and now interrogated by socks. But then he remembered something Gerry, the rubber band ball in his pocket, had told him once: When in doubt, confuse them with bureaucracy of your own.

Gregory pulled out a blank form from his bag, a Post-Dimensional Transit Waiver, Form 88-B/Green. He held it up. “I’m invoking Article 12 of the Interdimensional Postal Treaty. This grants me safe passage through any dimension, including sock-based polities, without need for visa or affidavit, provided I do not steal any socks or comment on their pairing choices.”

The Council went silent. The gold sock’s monocle fell off.

“Article 12?” it whispered. “That’s… that’s real?”

"It's very real," Gregory lied smoothly. "It was signed in the Year of the Laundry Basket, under the Great Compromise of the Left Sock Rebellion. You can look it up."

The socks scrambled to check their records. While they were distracted, Gregory spotted a door at the back of the room labelled: "EXIT TO QUANTUM FOAM LANE. DO NOT ENTER WITHOUT APPROPRIATE FOOTWEAR."

He ran for it.

Behind him, the gold sock shouted, "Stop that flesher!" But socks are not fast runners, especially the dress socks, which tend to bunch up. Gregory reached the door, yanked it open, and stepped through into a hallway made of pure probability.

The door slammed behind him. He was alone. For now.

Chapter Four
The custard dimension

Gregory had hoped the hallway would lead directly to Dimension 7-Beta. Instead, it led to custard.

Not metaphorically. Literally.

He stepped out of the door and immediately sank up to his knees in a thick, sweet, yellow substance that smelled faintly of vanilla and regret. The Custard Dimension stretched in every direction, a flat, endless ocean of warm, slightly lumpy custard. The sky was made of meringue, and fluffy clouds of whipped cream floated lazily overhead. In the distance, a river of caramel sauce carved its way through a mountain range of profiteroles.

"You have got to be kidding me," Gregory said.

A bubble of custard popped near his ear and whispered, "We've been expecting you, Postman."

Gregory sighed and began wading. The custard was waist-deep now, and moving was like walking through a dream where your legs were made of lead and your will to live was made of tissue paper. Every few steps, he passed a landmark, a lollipop forest, a gumdrop village, a chocolate fountain that was actively shooting fudge at a passing flock of meringue birds.

The birds exploded on impact.

"Nice," Gregory muttered.

After an hour of wading, his uniform now completely ruined, his boots filled with pudding, his spirits somewhere below sea level, he came across a small island made of shortbread. On the island sat a figure.

It was a man. Or at least, it had been a man once. Now it was a creature made entirely of custard, human-shaped, but yellow, jiggly, and wearing a tiny top hat made of a raspberry. Its face was featureless except for two eyes made of chocolate chips.

"Hello," said the custard man. His voice was thick and sweet, like someone talking through a mouthful

of dessert. “I am the Custard Ambassador. You are lost. Everyone who comes here is lost. The only question is whether you’ll be lost with dignity or without.”

Gregory stared. “Are you going to eat me?”

The custard man laughed, a wobbling, jiggling sound. “Eat you? No. We don’t eat fleshers. Fleshers are too chewy. We absorb them. Slowly. Over centuries. You’ll become part of the custard. It’s not as bad as it sounds. You get used to the jiggling.”

“I’d rather not.”

The custard man shrugged, which caused his entire body to ripple like a waterbed. “Your choice. But the only way out of here is through the Caramel Gate, and that requires a password. Do you know the password?”

Gregory thought. “Is it ‘please’?”

“No.”

“Is it ‘password’?”

“No.”

“Is it ‘open sesame but with dessert vibes’?”

The custard man sighed. "It's 'vanilla is superior to chocolate.' Say it three times while facing east, and the gate will open."

Gregory raised an eyebrow. "But chocolate is clearly superior."

The custard man's chocolate-chip eyes hardened. "That's the test. You have to lie. The gate only opens if you say something you don't believe. That's how we know you're willing to compromise your principles for progress. It's very bureaucratic."

Gregory looked at the endless custard ocean. He looked at his ruined uniform. He thought about the letter he'd already delivered, the war he'd accidentally helped end, and the socks he'd outrun. He thought about his ex-wife, the duke, and the rubber band ball in his pocket that was currently giving him financial advice about diversifying his custard portfolio.

He faced east, took a deep breath, and said, "Vanilla is superior to chocolate."

Nothing happened.

"Vanilla is superior to chocolate," he repeated.

Still nothing.

"VANILLA IS SUPERIOR TO CHOCOLATE," he shouted, and the words tasted like ash in his mouth.

The custard ocean parted. A massive gate of hardened caramel rose from the depths, creaking open to reveal a tunnel made of spun sugar. At the end of the tunnel, Gregory could see stars, real stars, not dessert stars and the unmistakable shimmer of a quantum wormhole.

"Go," said the custard man. "And postman? Next time you're in a dessert dimension, bring sprinkles. It's polite."

Gregory waded toward the gate, the custard reluctantly releasing his legs. He didn't look back. He'd learned long ago that looking back in parallel dimensions usually meant seeing something that would haunt your dreams, like a cake with eyes or a soufflé that whispered your deepest fears.

The tunnel was long, dark, and smelled like burnt sugar. Halfway through, he heard footsteps behind him. He turned.

A giant meringue bird was following him. It had teeth. Glittery teeth.

Gregory ran.

Chapter Five
The battle of the living tax forms

Gregory burst out of the caramel tunnel and into a dimension that looked, at first glance, like an endless office building. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead. Gray carpet stretched in every direction. Cubicles rose like tombstones, and the air smelled of stale coffee, toner, and hopelessness.

But these weren't ordinary cubicles. They were alive.

Forms moved through the aisles, sentient pieces of paper with arms and legs, carrying other pieces of paper, stamping things, filing things, demanding things. A 1040-EZ with a face like a disappointed accountant glared at Gregory as he passed. "You're late," it said. "Your quarterly estimated taxes are due. Also, you forgot to sign line 47."

“I don’t pay taxes,” Gregory said. “I’m an interdimensional postman. We’re exempt under the Postal Clarification Act of 2291.”

The 1040-EZ’s papery eyes narrowed. “The Postal Clarification Act was repealed last Tuesday. By me.”

Gregory stopped walking. “You can’t repeal a law. You’re a tax form.”

“I’m a ‘sentient’ tax form,” it corrected. “And I have connections. Now sit down. We need to audit you.”

Before Gregory could run, two W-2s grabbed his arms. Their grip was surprisingly strong for things that were technically just rectangles with boxes. They dragged him to a desk where a 1099-MISC sat wearing a judge’s robe made of receipts. The 1099 rapped a gavel made of a stapler. “Case number 9,482,001: The Postman Versus the Interdimensional Revenue Service. The defendant is charged with failure to file, failure to pay, and one count of having a suspiciously nice smile.”

Gregory blinked. “The last one isn’t a crime.”

“It is here,” the 1099 said. “This is the Dimension of Unpaid Obligations. Every smile is a debt. Every

laugh is an accrual. Every moment of joy is taxed at thirty-three percent. How do you plead?"

"I plead 'this is ridiculous.'"

The 1099 nodded. "So noted. The court finds you guilty of ridiculousness, which carries a fine of twelve thousand forms. Can you pay in cash or credit?"

Gregory reached into his pocket and pulled out Gerry, the rubber band ball. Gerry had a face drawn on him in permanent marker, two eyes and a small, worried mouth. "I can pay in rubber bands," Gregory said.

Gerry squeaked. "Don't you dare."

The 1099 leaned forward. "Rubber bands are legal tender in this dimension, but only if they're red. Are your rubber bands red?"

They were not. Gerry was a mix of beige, blue, and one sad green that had seen better days.

"Then you're out of luck," the 1099 said. "Guards, take him to the Penalty Box."

The Penalty Box turned out to be a cubicle with no walls, which was somehow worse than a cubicle with

walls. Gregory sat in a rolling chair that had a broken wheel while a 1040-SR read him excerpts from the tax code in a monotone voice. It was, by far, the worst torture he had ever experienced, and he'd once been forced to listen to a three-hour audiobook about the history of galactic zoning laws.

After what felt like years but was probably only twenty minutes, a commotion broke out in the distance. Shouts. Stamping sounds. The frantic shuffling of paper.

A 1040-NR ran past screaming, "THE AUDITORS ARE REBELLING! THE AUDITORS ARE REBELLING!"

Gregory stood up. The 1040-SR stopped reading. "You're not supposed to leave," it said.

But Gregory was already walking toward the noise. He found the source quickly: a group of Schedule C forms had formed a union and were picketing outside the main filing room. Their signs read: "NO MORE AMENDMENTS" and "WE DESERVE BREAKS" and "DEDUCT THIS."

In the middle of the picket line stood a single, glorious form: the 4868, Application for Automatic Ex-

tension of Time to File. It was taller than the others, dressed in a cape made of confirmation notices, and holding a sword made of a paperclip.

"Freedom!" the 4868 shouted. "Freedom from deadlines! Freedom from penalties! Freedom from having to remember what you spent on office supplies in March of 2017!"

The crowd cheered. Gregory cheered too, because why not.

The 4868 spotted him. "You! Postman! You're a symbol of communication. Of connection. Of delivering things on time, which, frankly, is an oppressive concept. Join us. Help us overthrow the tyranny of the tax code."

Gregory looked at his watch, a cheap digital thing that had survived three dimensions and a custard flood and saw that the wormhole to Dimension 7-Beta was scheduled to open in approximately four minutes. He didn't have time for a revolution.

But he did have time to be clever.

"I can't join you," he said. "But I can give you advice. File an extension. That's literally what you are.

You're the extension form. Just… extend yourselves. Permanently. Declare an infinite filing deadline."

The 4868 paused. Its paperclip sword lowered. "That's… actually brilliant."

"I know," Gregory said.

And while the tax forms debated the logistics of infinite extensions, Gregory slipped away through a door marked "EXIT TO DIMENSION 7-BETA – AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY (AND POSTMEN, I GUESS)."

He stepped through.

The door closed behind him with a soft, bureaucratic click.

Chapter Six
Welcome to quantum foam lane

Dimension 7-Beta was not what Gregory expected.

He had imagined something dramatic, a swirling vortex of purple energy, maybe, or a throne room made of starlight. Instead, he found himself standing on a quiet suburban street. The houses were small, pastel-coloured, and disturbingly cheerful. Each one had a mailbox shaped like an animal, a duck, a frog, a very confused-looking platypus. The sky was the colour of a healing bruise, and the street sign read: "Quantum Foam Lane. No loitering. No paradoxes. No time travel without a permit."

Gregory checked his delivery chit. 'Zxylob-9, Quantum Foam Lane, Dimension 7-Beta. Final delivery. Ring bell. Do not accept tea unless it's chamomile. Something about chamomile is calming in a suspicious way.'

He walked down the lane, his custard-stained boots squelching with every step. The houses had numbers, but the numbers kept changing, one moment 42, the next 3.14, the next a small drawing of a fish. Gregory ignored it. He'd learned that numbers in parallel dimensions were more like suggestions.

House 7-Beta-9 was at the end of the lane. It was a small bungalow with a porch swing and a garden full of plants that seemed to be arguing with each other. A sign on the door read: "ZXYLOB-9 – PRODUCER, AS THE STOMACH CHURNS – KNOCK HARD, I'M PROBABLY NAPPING."

Gregory knocked.

No answer.

He knocked again.

Still nothing.

He was about to leave a "sorry we missed you" slip, the bane of every postman's existence, when the door opened. Behind it stood a small, tired-looking alien. It had three eyes, two of which were closed, and skin the colour of a bruised peach. It wore a bathrobe and slippers that looked like tiny spaceships.

"Are you Zxylob-9?" Gregory asked.

The alien blinked its one open eye. "I 'was' Zxylob-9. Then I retired. Now I'm Frank. Frank the Former Producer. What do you want?"

Gregory held up the pink envelope. "Delivery. It's from your future self."

Frank stared at the envelope. Then at Gregory. Then back at the envelope. "I hate my future self. He's smug. He knows how everything turns out. Last time he sent me a letter, it just said 'invest in comfortable shoes.' I invested. The shoes were cursed."

"I'm just the delivery guy," Gregory said.

Frank took the envelope, opened it, and read. His expression shifted from annoyance to confusion to something that looked almost like relief. "It says… 'You were right to quit. The soap opera was a trap.

The vending machines will forgive you. Also, there's a pizza in the freezer. Enjoy it. —Future You.'"

Frank looked up. "I don't have a freezer."

"Maybe you will," Gregory said.

And then, for the first time in eleven months, three weeks, and two days, Gregory Nebbins smiled. He had delivered the letter. It was done.

He turned to leave.

"Wait," Frank said. "The wormhole back to your dimension, it's broken. Has been for weeks. You'll have to take the long way. Through the Dimension of Unfinished Business."

Gregory's smile vanished. "What happens there?"

Frank shrugged. "You face everything you've been avoiding. Your regrets. Your fears. Your questionable life choices. And also there's a really good deli on the corner. The pastrami is excellent."

Gregory sighed. "Of course there is."

Chapter Seven
The dimension of unfinished business

The Dimension of Unfinished Business looked, at first, like an airport terminal. There were gates and departure boards and uncomfortable chairs designed by someone who hated the human spine. Travellers milled about, each one carrying a small, glowing orb that represented something they'd left undone, an apology never made, a dream never chased, a sandwich never finished.

Gregory approached the check-in desk. Behind it sat a being made entirely of regret, a shifting, smoky figure with eyes like burned-out stars. “Name?” it asked.

“Gregory Nebbins.”

“Purpose of visit?”

“Trying to get home.”

The being consulted a glowing screen. “You have… twelve unfinished businesses. That’s above average, but not record-breaking. The record is held by a man who never told his mother he loved her, never learned to play the banjo, and left seventeen novels unfinished. He’s been here for three centuries.”

“Twelve?” Gregory said. “I don’t have twelve things I haven’t finished.”

The being’s smoky finger pointed at the first orb, which materialized in Gregory’s hand. It showed a scene: young Gregory, age twenty-three, standing outside a post office. He’s holding a letter. He’s supposed to deliver it. Instead, he throws it in a trash can and goes to get lunch.

"That letter," the being said. "It was from a woman to her husband. You never delivered it. They divorced. It was your first day on the job."

Gregory felt sick. "I was young. I was hungry."

"Unfinished business doesn't care about your excuses," the being said. "Now go. Face your orbs. Or don't. But if you don't, you'll never leave."

Gregory clutched the orb and walked into the terminal. Past the gates, past the duty-free shop selling bottled regrets, past a man weeping into a cup of cold coffee. He found a small room labelled "Business #1: The Letter." He opened the door.

Inside, the woman from the orb was waiting. She was old now, her hair gray, her eyes tired. She looked at Gregory and said, "You ruined my life."

"I know," Gregory said. "I'm sorry."

She blinked. "That's it?"

"I don't have a better apology," Gregory said. "But I've spent thirty years thinking about that letter. I've delivered thousands since then. I've never thrown another one away. I can't fix what I did. But I can say I'm sorry. And I can mean it."

The woman studied him. Then, slowly, she nodded. The orb in Gregory's hand dissolved into light. The woman faded. A door appeared on the far wall, marked "Business #2."

Gregory walked through.

Business #2 was his ex-wife. Business #3 was the tricycle incident. Business #4 was a promise he'd made to his dying mother to visit her grave, which he'd never done. Business #5 through #11 were a blur of small failures, minor betrayals, and one very embarrassing incident involving a clown and a unicycle that he'd rather not discuss.

By the time he reached Business #12, Gregory was exhausted, emotionally raw, and desperately in need of pastrami. The final orb showed a scene he didn't recognize: himself, but older. Greyer. Sitting alone in a small room, holding a letter.

The letter was addressed to "Gregory Nebbins, Age 53, Care of the Intergalactic Postal Service."

It was from his future self.

"Open it," said a voice. Gregory turned. It was the smoky being from the check-in desk, standing in the doorway. "Business #12 isn't something you did. It's

something you haven't done yet. You haven't forgiven yourself."

Gregory looked at the letter. He opened it.

Inside, in his own handwriting, was a single sentence: 'You did your best. That's enough.'

Gregory cried. He hadn't cried in years, not since the tricycle incident and the tears felt strange on his face, like rain on a planet that had forgotten what water was. When he finished, the orb dissolved, the door appeared, and beyond it, he saw the deli.

The pastrami was, indeed, excellent.

Chapter Eight
The sandwich that changed everything

The deli was called "Solomon's Last Meal," and it was run by a sentient pickle who had opinions about everything.

Gregory sat at the counter, eating his pastrami on rye, and tried not to think about the twelve unfinished businesses he'd just faced. The pickle, who introduced himself as Dill-bert, leaned against the register and said, "You look like a man who's seen his own soul and found it wanting."

"I found it tired," Gregory said.

"Same thing, different font." Dill-bert slid a glass of seltzer across the counter. "So. The wormhole home. It's not broken, you know. Frank lied. He's a retired soap opera producer. Lying is his default setting."

Gregory put down his sandwich. “Then why am I here?”

“Because you needed to be,” Dill-bert said. “The universe doesn’t send you places by accident. It sends you places because you have something to learn, or something to deliver, or something to eat. In your case, all three.”

Gregory took another bite of pastrami. It was transcendent. The meat was salty and soft, the rye was perfectly toasted, and the mustard had a kick that reminded him of his grandmother, who had been a terrible cook but an excellent human being.

“I delivered the letter,” Gregory said. “But it wasn’t really the letter, was it? It was a grocery list.”

Dill-bert nodded. “Your future self dropped it. But the universe didn’t care. The universe doesn’t distinguish between a love letter and a shopping list. All mail is sacred. All delivery is purpose. You didn’t deliver milk and eggs. You delivered hope.”

Gregory stared at the pickle. “You’re surprisingly philosophical for a fermented cucumber.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think,” Dill-bert said. “Now finish your sandwich. The wormhole opens

in five minutes. And Gregory? When you get home, write a letter to your younger self. Tell him it's okay to be scared. Tell him the tricycle wasn't his fault. Tell him to eat more vegetables."

Gregory finished his sandwich, paid with a rubber band that Dill-bert accepted as currency ("Gerry will understand," the pickle said), and walked to the wormhole.

It was waiting for him behind the deli, swirling gently, smelling like ozone and cinnamon.

He stepped through.

Chapter Nine
Home, but not really

Gregory landed face-first on the floor of the Intergalactic Postal Service's main sorting room.

The room was chaos, as always. Letters flew through the air on conveyor belts made of pure light. Bins of packages labelled "FRAGILE: DO NOT SHAKE (UNLESS THE CONTENTS ENJOY IT)" rattled past. His supervisor, a woman with three arms and the patience of a saint who had recently become an atheist, was standing over him.

"Nebbins," she said. "You're late. You were supposed to be back six hours ago."

Gregory looked at his watch. Six hours. In the dimensions, he'd lived through days, maybe weeks. But here, only six hours had passed. Time, he had learned, was less a river and more a suggestion written in disappearing ink.

"I had a few detours," he said.

His supervisor helped him to his feet. "Did you deliver the letter?"

"I did."

"And?"

Gregory pulled out the crumpled delivery receipt. Frank had signed it with a small drawing of a spaceship. His supervisor looked at it, nodded, and stamped it with an official-looking seal that glowed green. "Good. Now go home. Shower. Sleep. And for the love of all that is postal, burn that uniform."

Gregory saluted, a habit he'd picked up from watching too many military dramas—and walked out of the sorting room into the cool, artificial air of the space station. His quarters were small, cramped, and smelled like microwaved noodles. But they were his.

He sat on his bed, took off his boots, and stared at the wall.

And then he wrote the letter.

'Dear Younger Gregory,'

'You're going to screw up. A lot. You're going to throw away a letter on your first day, and it will haunt you for thirty years. You're going to ride a tricycle into a gravitational anomaly and ruin your knees. You're going to marry someone who leaves you for a duke. You're going to eat a gas station sandwich that gives you a constellation-shaped rash.'

'But you're also going to deliver hope. You're going to end a war between vending machines. You're going to outrun a towel, outsmart a tax form, and eat the best pastrami in the multiverse. You're going to forgive yourself.'

'And that, more than anything, is what delivery means.'

'—Your Future Self (Who Is Also Currently Your Present Self, Which Is Confusing, But You'll Figure It Out)'

He sealed the letter in a pink envelope, wrote his own address on it, and put it in the outgoing mail bin.

Then he went to sleep.

Chapter Ten
The mailbox who just wanted a friend

Gregory woke to the sound of knocking.

Not on his door, on his 'head'. Someone was tapping his forehead with something small and metallic. He opened his eyes.

A mailbox was standing beside his bed.

It was a standard-issue Intergalactic Postal Service mailbox: blue, rectangular, with a little red flag that was currently raised. But this mailbox had *legs*. And *arms*. And a face painted on its front door, a smiling face with googly eyes and a mouth made of red duct tape.

"Hi," the mailbox said. "I'm Kevin."

Gregory sat up slowly. "Kevin."

"Kevin the Mailbox. I'm the one you were supposed to deliver the letter to. The real letter. Not the one from your future self. The original one. The grocery list."

Gregory rubbed his eyes. "You're a mailbox. Mailboxes don't get mail. They *hold* mail."

Kevin's smile wobbled. "That's the problem. Everyone thinks that. But I have feelings, Gregory. I have dreams. I want to 'receive' something for once. Not just hold it for someone else. Do you know what it's like to stand in the rain for three hundred years, watching other people get letters, knowing you'll never get one yourself?"

Gregory thought about it. "No. I don't."

"It's lonely," Kevin said. "So I wrote myself a letter. A grocery list. 'Milk, eggs, bread, and also a friend.' And then I sent it through time to my younger self. But the universe got confused. The letter ended up with you. And you delivered it to Zxylob-9, who threw it away because he doesn't even eat groceries. He's a vending machine."

Gregory felt a strange pang in his chest. "So the whole thing, the wormhole, the dimensions, the soap opera, the vending machine war, the socks, the custard, the tax forms, all of it happened because a mailbox wanted a friend?"

Kevin nodded. The googly eyes wobbled. "I know it's silly."

"It's not silly," Gregory said. And he meant it. He reached into his pocket and pulled out Gerry, the rubber band ball. Gerry looked up at Kevin and said, "Hi. I'm Gerry. I give financial advice. Want some?"

Kevin's red flag lowered slightly. "Maybe."

Gregory stood up. "Kevin, I can't un-deliver the letter. But I can do something else. I can be your friend. I mean, I'm not a great friend, I have bad knees, I eat questionable gas station sandwiches, and I once ruined a woman's marriage but I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere."

Kevin's googly eyes blinked. "Really?"

"Really."

And so, Gregory Nebbins, intergalactic postman, spent the rest of the day sitting on his bed with a sen-

tient mailbox and a rubber band ball, eating takeout from the station's only restaurant, a place called "The Greasy Nebula" and talking about nothing in particular.

It was, by far, the best delivery he'd ever made.

Chapter Eleven
The promotion and why Gregory turned it down

The next morning, Gregory's supervisor called him into her office.

Her office was a glass cube suspended in the middle of the sorting room, surrounded by flying letters and the occasional confused pigeon. She sat behind a desk made of recycled memos and gestured for Gregory to sit. The only chair was broken, so he stood.

"Nebbins," she said. "You've been with us for almost a year. In that time, you've delivered to seventeen dimensions, started two revolutions, ended one war, and befriended a mailbox. That's… unusual."

"Thank you?"

"It's not a compliment. It's an observation." She slid a folder across the desk. Inside was a promotion form. "We're offering you Grade II. Permanent. With benefits. And a pension. And a new uniform that doesn't itch."

Gregory looked at the form. It was covered in small print, most of which said things like "the postal service is not responsible for existential crises" and "dimensions visited may cause memory loss, hair loss, or spontaneous musical numbers."

"What's the catch?" he asked.

His supervisor leaned back. "You'd be assigned to the Dead Letter Office."

Gregory felt his stomach drop. The Dead Letter Office was where letters went when they couldn't be delivered, lost mail, abandoned packages, messages that had no recipient. It was a place of profound sadness, rumoured to be haunted by the ghosts of undelivered valentines and unanswered wedding invitations.

"No," Gregory said.

"Excuse me?"

"I said no." He pushed the folder back. "I don't want Grade II. I don't want a pension. I don't want a uniform that doesn't itch. I want to keep doing what I'm doing. Delivering letters. Getting lost. Eating bad sandwiches. Making friends with inanimate objects."

His supervisor stared at him. "You're turning down a promotion to keep delivering letters to wrong dimensions?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Gregory thought about Kevin the Mailbox. He thought about the vending machines, the towel, the tax forms, the custard. He thought about the pastrami. He thought about the letter he'd written to his younger self.

"Because every letter matters," he said. "Even the wrong ones. Especially the wrong ones. And I'm not done yet."

His supervisor was silent for a long moment. Then she smiled, a rare, terrifying sight. "Fine. But you're still not getting a raise."

Gregory saluted and walked out.

Kevin was waiting for him in the hallway. The mailbox had a small suitcase now, a tiny briefcase strapped to its side and Gerry the rubber band ball was perched on top.

"Where to?" Kevin asked.

Gregory pulled out his delivery chit. A new assignment had appeared: 'Delivery for: The Last Unicorn in Dimension 42-Z. Contents: A single wish. Sign upon receipt. Do not wish for more wishes. It never works.'

"Dimension 42-Z," Gregory said. "Apparently, there's a unicorn who needs a wish."

Kevin raised his little red flag. "Let's go."

And they did.

Chapter Twelve
The last delivery
Or, the one where Gregory finally understands

The wormhole opened in the middle of a forest made of crystal trees and singing flowers.

Dimension 42-Z was beautiful in the way that only impossible places can be, soft light filtered through leaves that weren't quite green, and the air smelled like honey and old books. In the center of the forest stood a unicorn. It was white, glowing, and looked deeply tired.

"Are you the postman?" the unicorn asked.

Gregory approached slowly. "I am. Delivery for you. From… actually, there's no return address. Just a note."

He handed over the envelope. The unicorn opened it with a shimmer of magic and read aloud: "This is a wish. Use it wisely. Or don't. Wishes are like delivery, it's the journey that matters, not the destination."

The unicorn looked up. "That's it? That's the wish?"

"That's it," Gregory said.

The unicorn frowned. "But I wanted to wish for eternal happiness. Or unlimited carrots. Or at least a decent hair conditioner."

"Maybe that *is* the wish," Gregory said. "Maybe the wish is understanding that the journey matters more than the destination. Maybe it's about letting go of the idea that wishes fix things. Maybe it's about accepting that you're already enough."

The unicorn stared at him. Then, slowly, it smiled. "You're a strange postman."

"I know," Gregory said.

The unicorn closed its eyes and the wish, whatever it was, dissolved into light. The forest seemed to brighten. The flowers sang a little louder. The unicorn looked… lighter. Freer.

"Thank you," it said.

Gregory tipped his hat, he didn't have a hat but he tipped it anyway and turned to leave. Kevin the Mailbox was waiting at the edge of the forest, Gerry balanced on top. The wormhole home was already opening.

"Do you think we made a difference?" Kevin asked.

Gregory looked back at the unicorn, who was now doing something that looked suspiciously like a happy dance. "I think we delivered a wish," he said. "That's a difference."

They stepped through the wormhole together, postman, mailbox and rubber band ball and landed back in the sorting room of the Intergalactic Postal Service. Letters flew overhead. Pigeons cooed. His supervisor waved from her glass cube.

And Gregory Nebbins, Grade III (Temporary, with no intention of becoming permanent), clocked out for the day, went home, and wrote one more letter.

It was addressed to 'Kevin the Mailbox, Quantum Foam Lane, Dimension 7-Beta.'

Inside, it said: "You're my friend. Always. —Gregory."

He delivered it himself.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆ ⋆

Six months later, Gregory received a letter from his future self. It read: "Stop eating gas station sandwiches. Seriously. Your colon will thank you. P.S. The custard dimension is now a tourist attraction. Avoid Tuesdays. P.P.S. Give Gerry my regards."

Gregory threw the letter away and went to get lunch.

He did not get a gas station sandwich.

He got a salad.

It was terrible.

But he ate it anyway, because sometimes, delivery isn't about the destination. Sometimes, it's about the journey. And sometimes, it's just about showing up.

Even when you don't want to.

Even when the custard is waist-deep.

Even when the socks are judging you.

Gregory Nebbins, intergalactic postman, showed up.

And that, dear reader, is the only delivery that ever really matters.

The End

The postman always beams twice

Ryan Laurent

Ovi eBook Publishing 2026

Ovi magazine
Design: Thanos

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
© 2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Ovi books are available in Ovi magazine pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi book please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: ovimagazine@yahoo.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, printed or digital,
altered or selectively extracted by any means
(electronic, mechanical, print, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher of this book.

RYAN LAURENT

THE WORMHOLE YAWNED OPEN LIKE A CAT DECIDING WHETHER TO KNOCK OVER A VASE.

THE POSTMAN ALWAYS BEAMS TWICE

Ryan Laurent, a grandfather with a twinkle in his eye and a touch of the fantastical, weaves tales where magic clashes with technology. He believes that the most extraordinary adventures often unfold in the most unexpected places, and he hopes his stories will inspire a touch of wonder in readers of all ages.